

Crafting High-Quality Low-Cost Housing

Hugo S. Subotovsky A.I.A. Architects LCC

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Hugo Subotovsky, Principal of Hugo S. Subotovsky A.I.A. Architects, likes a challenge. When he first started his career, he worked in the luxury market. Now his eponymous full-service architecture and planning firm does 90 percent of its work in subsidized housing, creating homes for \$200 per foot instead of \$500 per foot without sacrificing design.

"We are creating as good of architecture as luxury housing because we are under so much scrutiny from the city to raise

the bar from what the old projects in the 1960s were," says Subotovsky.

Jacques Gerstenfeld founded the firm in Suffern, N.Y., in 1971, and Subotovsky joined the firm in 1987. The firm focused on single-family residential work and renovation projects in the New York City area, as well as multi-family housing in upstate New York. When Subotovsky made partner in 1997, the firm changed its name to Gerstenfeld-Subotovsky Architects. After Gerstenfeld retired in 1999, the firm became

Hugo S. Subotovsky A.I.A. Architects and eased out of residential work little by little. Hugo S. Subotovsky A.I.A. Architects has grown to 25 people, operating out of its headquarters in Suffern and a satellite office in New York City. The diversified firm specializes in new multi-family structures, new construction of commercial structures and mixed occupancy buildings. It also rehabilitates existing residential structures, which requires collaboration with various state and local

agencies, and private developers.

A Subotovsky Home Is Where the Heart Is

Developing low-income housing specifically comes with intangible bonuses, like when Subotovsky watched the first family from a shelter move into a building the firm completed for a non-profit. "We love serving that market," Subotovsky

says. "But it is more gratifying seeing a family moving into a home for the first time."

A home, however, is only as good as the community that surrounds it. Subotovsky and company also tackle urban renewal projects, such as designing one of the largest real estate development projects built in the Bronx: Boricua Village. Found in the Melrose Commons area of the South Bronx, the mixed-use community includes approximately 700 units of low- and moderate-income housing, 40,000 square feet of commercial space and an underground parking structure with about 175 spaces.

The village also will serve as a new, third campus for Boricua College, the first post-secondary institution in the U.S. for those of Puerto Rican and Hispanic descent. The 120,000 square-foot, 14-story building houses classrooms, lecture halls, an amphitheater and administrative offices, creating a state-of-the-art facility to educate the youth and

adults of the community and surrounding borough. When the college opens, it will bring more than 300 jobs and an estimated \$15 million in additional revenue for the Melrose area.



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But urban renewal is a tricky process, and delays come from many sources. After New York City awarded the land to the Boricua project, development stalled for nine years for various reasons, such as strict building height restrictions and open-space requirements. When Atlantic Development Group got involved with the project, re-zoning and infrastructure issues were resolved, and approvals from the city came in. With his designs and Atlantic taking care of the construction, Boricua Village is about 70-percent complete, says Subotovsky.

Tricks of the Trade

As the economy slows down, Subotovsky and his firm are using the time to build skills and experiment with new technology. The employees are currently experts in AutoCAD, but they're also trying a couple of different Building Information Modeling programs (such as REVIT). "We're trying to be so efficient that we waste time looking for efficiency," says Subotovsky. "But we like toys."

Hugo S. Subotovsky A.I.A Architects doesn't just play with technology; it is essential for business and must be reliable. Unicom, a network systems provider, handles all the firm's information technology needs, including software purchase, and systems and server maintenance. Subotovsky says Unicom is very good at what it does, and Ariel Aufgang, A.I.A., Subotovsky's partner, agrees.

"When you don't have to worry about the technology, it is liberating. It lets you focus on what is important: Architecture," says Aufgang. "From a technical





standpoint, when we expanded our second office, [Unicom] was integral in connecting the two offices seamlessly, so we could work as one team even though we're in two locations."

As the firm looks to its future, it is working on several projects with funding that depends on green design, so several employees have become LEED Accredited Professionals. The firm recently worked on Staten Island hospital, Sea View Hospital and Rehabilitation Center and Home, converting nurses' dormitories into affordable and green housing for senior citizens. The historic hospital presented interesting challenges: The building had to meet the requirements of the local landmark society, while being as green as possible. The firm is also working on a building for special needs housing that will be Enterprise Green Communities certified.

For now, Subotovsky plans to stay in the multi-family housing market. Though the firm has ideas for doable projects now, some plans are on hold until banks start lending again. When they do, Subotovsky's thinking global.

"I think at this point now, I'd like to expand to other countries in order to bring more expertise," says Subotovsky, positive about his experienced firm's future. "We are fortunate to be in New York City, because it is probably the most aggressive environment in the world for producing affordable housing. I would like to bring that idea to other places in the world where lack of housing is a problem." ■



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